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Viewing cable 06BEIRUT2447, TFLE01: MARONITE DOYEN WARNS: "THE WEST MUST WIN"

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06BEIRUT2447	2006-07-23 18:22	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL//NOFORN	Embassy Beirut

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TAGS: [IS](#) [LE](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: TFLE01: MARONITE DOYEN WARNS: "THE WEST MUST WIN
THIS WAR."

SUMMARY

¶1. (C/NF) On 7/22, Maronite doyen Sheikh Michel el Khoury (and son of Lebanon's first president) told the Ambassador that the West's hopes for democracy in the Middle East depend upon winning the current war against Hizballah and its Syrian and Iranian backers. Still, Sheikh Michel warned that with its aggressive military campaign, "Israel will kill the patient by fighting the cancer." He worried that Hizballah will manage to pull a victory out of any scenario, no matter how much damage Israel inflicts on Lebanon. Sheikh Michel did mention that Hizballah is firmly against the establishment of a humanitarian corridor to south Lebanon, however, perhaps suggesting that one of the keys to defeating Hizballah would be to undermine its vast social services network. He also hoped that Maronite Patriarch Sfeir would soon make a strong statement condemning Hizballah's recklessness. He advised, however, that the Patriarch is surrounded by pro-Syrian advisors in high levels of the Maronite church. Sheikh Michel defended the performance of Prime Minister Siniora, and said he would make an ideal president if not for Lebanon's "stupid" confessional rules. Like most other prominent Christian figures, Sheikh Michel reserved his strongest condemnation for Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun, accusing him of embezzling tens of millions of dollars in tax revenues from Lebanon's Central Bank. End summary.

HIZBALLAH AND THE NOBILITY OF FAILURE

¶2. (C/NF) On 7/22, former Central Bank Governor and Minister of Defense Sheikh Michel el Khoury met the Ambassador and emboff over lunch. Sheikh Michel, the octogenarian son of Lebanon's first president, Beshara el Khoury, told the Ambassador that the West "must win" the current war against Hizballah and its supporters if it is to defend its hopes for democracy in the Middle East. Khoury warned that if Hizballah wins this conflict, "Lebanon as we know it will disappear," and Iran will be emboldened to use more force to secure even greater power in the region.

¶3. (C/NF) But the real problem, Sheikh Michel explained, lay in the fact that it would be difficult to wrest victory from Hizballah's grasp. Just as Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser was able to ride Egypt's catastrophic military defeat in the 1967 War to even greater heights of popularity, Hassan Nasrallah and Hizballah will be able to claim victory over Israel and the West simply by having stood up to them, regardless of the ammount of punishment that Lebanon absorbs. In what he described as their "perverse logic," Sheikh Michel said that Lebanon's Muslim community, especially the Shia, would support Hizballah more and more as Israel's military assault becomes more intense and the Lebanese sustain greater and greater casualties, "You cannot defeat them though violence. They welcome it and are not afraid of death." Ultimately, Sheikh Michel worried, "Israel will kill the patient in fighting the cancer."

¶4. (C/NF) Indicative of the degree to which Hizballah would relish any destruction and humanitarian casualties inflicted by Israel's campaign, Sheikh Michel told the Ambassador that Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah was firmly against the establishment of an international humanitarian corridor in Lebanon's south. Sheikh Michel explained that Hizballah wanted to remain the sole provider of humanitarian relief in the south (heavily funded, of course, by Iran), without competition from the international community.

¶5. (C/NF) Sheikh Michel also worried about the effect that so many displaced persons would have on Lebanon's delicate confessional balance. He said that waves of Shiite refugees from the south were bound to exacerbate tensions with

Lebanon's Christian and Sunni communities. He added that stories of Shiite squatters and reports of fights at refugee shelters are starting to become common. As he discussed the dangers posed by so many displaced persons, an especially persistent fly continued to flit over Sheikh Michel's lunch table. As he attempted to swat it away for the umpteenth time, Sheikh Michel said to the Ambassador, "I do apologize for the fly, I've never had one up here before ... it must be from the south."

A ROLE FOR THE PATRIARCH

¶6. (C/NF) Sheikh Michel argued for a stronger role for Maronite Patriarch Sfeir, and said he hoped that he would make a strong statement condemning Hizballah's recklessness now that he has returned to Lebanon. Sheikh Michel worried however, that the Patriarch lacks the resolve to do so, and that many of his closest advisors are pro-Syrian. He said that he had had spent a few hours with the Patriarch the day before, and strongly argued that he condemn Hizballah's actions. Doing so, he suggested, would help put Hizballah in a corner. He described the Patriarch as "weak-willed," however, and said he wasn't sure his resolve would hold, especially after listening again to his pro-Syrian advisors. Khoury named a Bishop Rai from Jbeil as one being especially close to both the Patriarch and Syria.

PRAISE FOR SINIORA

¶7. (C/NF) Whereas Sheikh Michel was disappointed with the Patriarch's lack of resolve, however, he had strong praise for Prime Minister Siniora's leadership during the current crisis. Impressed that he has managed to hold his government together over the past two weeks, Sheikh Michel said that Siniora is perhaps the only "real Lebanese" on the political scene today, an individual who is willing to put the good of the country before his own personal or sectarian interests. He told the Ambassador that he thought Siniora would be the perfect president now, if it weren't for the "stupid" sectarian code that reserves Lebanon's presidency for a Maronite Christian. "We Maronites don't have anyone as good as Siniora. We need to start thinking like a nation." The only criticism Michel had for his friend the Prime Minister is that he lacks the decisiveness necessary for effective leadership in crisis. "He has always been the number two man, and doesn't know to use his power. But he's learning."

(MORE) CONDEMNATION FOR AOUN

¶8. (C) Adding one more voice to the growing chorus of dissent against FPM leader Michel Aoun, Sheikh Michel took several opportunities during the 90-minute lunch to deplore Aoun's character and motivation. Sheikh Michel said that Aoun had clearly wagered on a Hizballah victory and was hoping to use his ties with them to create a new Lebanese majority, albeit one anchored in Damascus and Tehran. Michel said that Aoun had few scruples about his allies, however, as long as he calculated they could propel him into the presidency. As other interlocutors have suggested, Sheikh Michel believes that Aoun made a deal with Syria to come back to Lebanon. Unlike many of his co-conspirators, however, Sheikh Michel had details to back his accusations up. According to Sheikh Michel, Syria allowed Aoun to embezzle between 30-50 million dollars in tax revenues from the Lebanese Central Bank before his return from exile in 2005. He has since used these funds to finance his political aspiration and a series of private ventures as well. Sheikh Michel said that Aoun's forthcoming "Orange TV" will largely be financed by these tax revenues, although he will have a certain amount of real private donations to make the money look clean.

FELTMAN